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DE RUEHMN #0560/01 2711333
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 281333Z SEP 09 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9379
INFO RUCNMER/MERCOSUR COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS MONTEVIDEO 000560

SIPDIS

STATE FOR WHA/BSC MARY DASCHBACH

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: URUGUAY: CONTROVERSIAL MUJICA INTERVIEWS PROMPT
OPPOSITION TO QUESTION HIS FITNESS TO GOVERN

¶1. (U) This telegram is sensitive but unclassified, and not for Internet distribution.

Summary

¶2. (SBU) A number of controversial statements by Frente Amplio (FA) coalition presidential candidate Jose Mujica have led to a press firestorm and criticism of the candidate both from the opposition and Uruguayan President Tabare Vazquez. In a September 13 interview with a prominent Argentine newspaper, Mujica made a number of comments concerning his experience as a Tupamaro guerrilla in the 1970s that left him open to charges of being skeptical of democracy and the justice system. Quickly thereafter, a book on Mujica was released which quoted him as making disparaging remarks about a wide array of public figures, including the Kirchners, the Socialist Party, the military, and even the Vazquez government. The book's publication promoted President Vazquez to distance himself (temporarily) from his party's candidate and gave the National Party ample ammunition to question Mujica's fitness for the presidency. However, it remains to be seen whether the controversy will affect Mujica's lead in the polls as the elections near. End Summary.

The La Nacion Interview: Provocative Remarks About the Past, Moderate Message for the Future

¶3. (U) On September 13, the Argentine newspaper La Nacion published Ricardo Carpena's lengthy interview of FA presidential candidate Jose Mujica, which had been conducted on Mujica's ranch a week before. The interview dealt with a variety of topics, including Mujica's past as a Tupamaro guerrilla, his time in prison, and his current political philosophy. Mujica's most notable and widely quoted comments from the interview centered around his experience as a Tupamaro guerrilla during the 1970s, as the candidate claimed that "the violence (by the Tupamaros) in Uruguay really was justified" and that "justice has the stench of vengeance that comes from its origins."

¶4. (U) Following the publication of the interview, Mujica's opponents in October's presidential election immediately responded, with National Party vice-presidential candidate Jorge Larranaga telling the press that Mujica's comments unequivocally demonstrated his anti-democratic views. In a separate interview, opposition presidential candidate Luis Alberto Lacalle added, "From assassins, torturers, and thieves, nothing surprises me."

¶5. (U) Mujica insists these comments say little about his contemporary political views. He claimed his comment about violence being justified was a defense of the methods and objectives of the Tupamaros relative to those of the dictatorship, which he regretted being unable to prevent.

Mujica also claimed that his other controversial statement - that "justice has the stench of vengeance" - actually came in the context of his preference to know the truth about what happened in the past rather than to achieve justice (or, in his eyes, revenge) against those who committed the crimes of the dictatorship. Leading daily El Pais ran an editorial condemning Mujica's continued assertion that the Tupamaros were fighting against tyranny (the military dictatorship came into being after the Tupamaros had already been crushed).

¶6. (U) In general, Mujica described himself in the interview as having a fairly moderate political philosophy, along the lines of that espoused by Brazilian President Lula da Silva, with an emphasis on negotiation and conciliation. When Carpena asked Mujica if he sees himself as more like Lula than like Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, Mujica replied, "I think so. The policy of negotiation produces more results. It is more accommodating." Furthermore, he criticized Chavez's governing style, opining that Chavez "talks too much" and is creating a huge bureaucracy. At the same time, though, he expressed admiration for the wisdom of Fidel Castro.

"Pepe Coloquios": What Was He Thinking?

¶7. (U) The publication of the La Nacion interview was followed only a few days later by the release of a book entitled "Pepe Coloquios" ("Pepe Speaks Frankly"), a compilation of 18 interviews of Mujica by Uruguayan journalist Alfredo Garcia. The book includes even more controversial statements by the candidate. Mujica dubbed Argentina as "having hysterical, crazy, paranoid reactions",

and its first family, the Kirchners, whom he labeled as "Peronist losers." Among other colorful remarks, Mujica also added his belief that land "belongs to the nation and should be rented out by the State". He described both the Vazquez government and the Socialist party as machines to create government jobs, and characterized the Montevideo municipality as a failure. Mujica also criticized the Central Bank, the University of the Republic, civil society, the private sector, agricultural interests, and the military in language which is not repeatable in polite company.

¶8. (SBU) Just as with the La Nacion interview, the reaction to the release of "Pepe Coloquios" was swift. Larranaga asked an audience in Buenos Aires for forgiveness on behalf of the Uruguayan people, adding that Mujica's remarks revealed a subconscious desire not to be elected president. Surprisingly, President Vazquez also joined in the condemnations, telling a group in the United States that Mujica says stupid things with which Vazquez himself does not agree. Mujica has since apologized for his remarks, and both he and Garcia have asserted that the quotations were taken out of context. After initial consternation, the Frente Amplio rallied around Mujica, and continued to blame the opposition for "negative campaigning".

¶9. (SBU) The incidents demonstrate a phenomenon witnessed throughout the campaign: Mujica's tendency to speak his mind, with little thought to the implications. For many voters, Mujica's frankness adds to his appeal, but for others it confirms his unsuitability to lead the country. Astori is widely seen as a moderating force in this regard, with Mujica even proposing that any debate between himself and Lacalle include their respective running mates. However, Astori can only do so much to ensure that his running mate stays on message.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) The race remains close, with the most recent polling giving Mujica a 44-32 percent edge over Lacalle in October's elections and a five point advantage in a second-round November runoff, which most experts view as very likely to occur. This poll was taken prior to the La Nacion

interview, but given that most Mujica voters support their candidate largely because of his honesty, it is doubtful that those already squarely in the Mujica camp will be deterred by his comments. However, it remains to be seen whether the key seven percent of still undecided voters will prize Mujica's frankness and likability or if they will turn towards the more predictable Lacalle. End Comment.

Matthewman